

Sermon preached at Matins in Westminster Abbey,
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"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"

So the Pope has come to the "holy land of Ireland" and gone home again. He has left pictures in the mind which will stay with us for quite a time: a hugely vital personality, a manifest delight for people, clear-cut convictions expressed not just with firmness but with warmth. He said Christian things, and he said them with great care, so great that those who took exception to his message had to bend its obvious general sense in order to do so.

That message was a simple one. Distilled to its essence it said two things: 'Correct injustice' and 'Reject violence'. Justice and Peace - are two fundamental expressions of the royal law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself".

But does not such a message raise some very difficult questions? To say this is not to disparage His Holiness. It is to face the problem raised by any purely Christian utterance on the issues of our world, namely that it is easy enough to get agreement on moral principles but almost impossible to agree on the moral facts.

To illustrate. 'Correct injustice' - who would disagree with that? 'But,' says one side, 'there is no injustice. The law of the land applies. Civil rights are ensured. To pretend that there is injustice is to make out that the men of violence have a genuine cause when they have not.' 'Of course there is injustice,' replies the other. 'There is discrimination in jobs and housing against the minority; and anyway the very presence of the British forces, the very existence of the border, are injustices to the people of Ireland.' 'We also are part of the people of Ireland,' comes the answer to that, 'and by a large majority in a free vote we have shown that we want to stay in the United Kingdom, to keep the border. Self-

determination is a basic right of natural justice, and to take that away from us by violence is injustice. Discrimination, if it occurs (which we do not admit), can be dealt with by British laws passed for just this purpose. The British Army is there simply to preserve justice.'

Or again; 'Reject violence.' Everyone will put their hand on their heart and swear they do not want violence. 'But what are you to do?' they will say. 'The other side are utterly intransigent on the point that matters. No constitutional change, no power-sharing, no reform will alter that.' And they are right. If you have a situation where one party wants X and only X, and the other party will not have X or anything like it at any price, no compromise is possible, and no other measures will affect the real issue. To say 'Reject violence' to both sides is certainly Christian and sounds even-handed; but, of course, it is not. In the nature of the case it cannot be. Where one side has what it wants and the other does not, and a peaceful changeover is ruled out, an end to violence simply leaves the first side in possession. By pleading with all parties to end the killing, the Pope was in fact asking the I.R.A to accept defeat; and it is hardly surprising that they refused.

But let us be quite clear: this was not due to any failure of skill or courage on his part. It was the usual result of taking Christ's line, which always requires someone to sacrifice the one thing they care about.

Is there then no other Christian approach to the tragedy of Ireland which might have more immediate, if limited influence for good? There can be - but it will not take the form either of absolute moral exhortation or of some political package. It will be a matter of helping those people who are open to change to grow in their attitudes to each other in ways that make good and constructive action easier. For the deadlock is not just a death-grapple between two evil monsters, the man of violence, watched by the great majority who need no repentance. If that were so, the trouble would have been resolved long ago.

In fact many efforts of this kind have already been made in Ireland itself by brave and caring people. Much has been done to bring communities together, to dispel mutual ignorance, to make friends across the lines of

division, especially among the women and children. The churches - most of them - have played a big part, and special tribute ought to be paid to the work, little known in this country, of the Irish Ecumenical Institute which has sponsored searching and constructive studies of social and cultural areas of conflict. It is not for us to exhort, much less rebuke those on the other side of the water who are in the thick of it. We must look to our own part and ask if there are any beams in our own eyes, any sins and failures of which we need to repent.

There is one fact about Ireland for which Christians, of all people, ought to have a natural sympathy. For the Irish, as for the Church, their history is their life-blood. This is true of North and South, Catholic and Protestant alike. They are proud of it and will not disown it, even if some want to break free from some of its legacies.

And they have reason to be proud. Ireland was one of the sanctuaries of art and learning in Europe's Dark Ages. For 1400 years the Irish have been prodigal in giving their sons and daughters for the Church's mission all over the world. In modern times Ireland's contribution to culture has been out of all proportion to her numbers.

But we, the British, are part of that history, and no good part of it. From the twelfth century to the early twentieth most of what we did in Ireland added, either by oppression or misjudgement, to her sorrows. The real miracle of modern Ireland is that the vast majority of Irish people are so ready to forgive and forget, and to treat individual British as friends.

The first thing is to put right our relationship with the Irish people and nation. We are still dominated by a patronising, indeed insulting nineteenth century caricature of the Irish. We are most of us grossly ignorant of the facts of our history and of our own record in that country. In Christian terms the first indispensable step to real progress in Ireland is penitence: an acknowledgement by us of our faults and failures in the past, of our sins towards Ireland. Following naturally from that the second step is that we should admit our need of the wisdom and generosity of the Irish Republic to advise and help us in dealing with this tragic deadlock. Both these things could be done. A major speech by our

Prime Minister would be a suitable medium; and I like to think that our present Prime Minister could do it well.

We need to say to Dublin, 'Look, we are out of our depth', to ask their cooperation not just in our measures, but in framing a common policy as genuinely equal partners, equally and inescapably committed to finding the best answer for all the inhabitants of Ireland, North and South. What need is there to call in the United Nations or the Mayor of New York when the people who understand the issues more deeply than anyone else are there, across the water, perfectly willing to help? And one gesture which would do more than any other to encourage that help would be this: if we would recognise publicly and officially the simple fact that their commitment to ultimate Irish unity in the Eire constitution has nothing whatever in common with the I.R.A , its methods, or its goal, which is that of a Marxist one-party state. The Irish do not want to coerce Protestant Ulster or violate human rights. By treating their natural long-term vision and hope as identical with the aims of the terrorists we foolishly give unwarranted and disastrous aid and comfort to the men of violence.

Related to this is another mistake that we as Christians can be in danger of making. The growth of friendship and cooperation between Catholic and Protestant churches and congregations in Ireland is heartening. But it will always advance more slowly than it need, if it is thought by Protestants to conceal an implied commitment to political union. If the Churches would make a joint declaration: first, that their concern for the Christian friendship was for its own sake, without prejudice either way to the reunification issue; and secondly, that they would uphold the law of Christ and both the British and Irish constitutions by joining forces to fight any form of discrimination against Catholics or Protestants on either side of the border, in such things as jobs and housing, then the spirit of reconciliation would blow more freely.

Two suggestions, building on what has already been achieved, motivated by Christ's royal law for all human life . Small, indeed, but in so complex a tangle of history and blood one can take only small steps at a time. Sweeping solutions like 'Pull out the troops' may sound noble,

but every informed person in London, Belfast and Dublin agrees that at present the results of such a move would be massacre, Civil War and confrontation between Britain and Eire.

There is a Jewish story that goes like this. One day the angels asked God, "What will you do at the Day of Judgement when David and Goliath appear before you, each accusing the other?" God replied, "It will be for me to try to make them friends". If there is to be any worthwhile future for our Protestant friends and fellow citizens in Ulster someone must try to make them friends with the Catholics both north and south of the border. We can play no part in that unless we by penitence, humility and love begin to heal the wounds of history and become ourselves better friends with our Irish neighbours.

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